In the 1970s and ’80s, the Los Angeles Police Department had a reputation as an arrogant, aggressive paramilitary force that covered up acts of brutality, racism and corruption. And then, on March 3, 1991, a passerby videotaped four white police officers beating Rodney King, a black motorist, with heavy aluminum batons, 56 times in 81 seconds. When the cops were acquitted, all hell broke loose in Los Angeles. And reform became the order of the day.

In “Blue,” Joe Domanick, an investigative reporter, associate director of the Center on Media, Crime and Justice at John Jay College in New York City, and the author of two previous books on cops and crime in California, draws on interviews with police officers, former gang members and community activists to tell the multi-dimensional story of reform — and resistance to reform — in the LAPD during the last 25 years.

“Blue” is, at times, repetitious and Domanick has a tendency to step on his chronologically-based narrative. That said, his book is an informative and timely tale, focused on four chiefs of police: Daryl Gates, Willie Williams, Bernard Parks and Bill Bratton.

During Gates’ 14 year tenure, Domanick emphasizes, the department was “a macho man’s dream.” In the name of crime fighting, Gates’ LAPD made war on black South LA, Mexican East LA and Central American Pico-Union. From January 1989 to January 1992, LAPD dogs bit 900 people, compared to 20 by the Philadelphia police department. While Gates was chief, however, crimes reported per person increased at twice the national average.

The LAPD drifted under Williams and Parks, the first African-American police chiefs in the city’s history. With the appointment of Bratton, Domanick argues, the culture and the tactics of the LAPD began to change. Using computerized maps, Bratton flooded “hot” crime zones with cops. He authorized officers to “stop and frisk” anyone who looked or acted suspicious and to go after “minor crimes” (a
component of the zero tolerance “broken windows” theory). But he also made bonding with members of
the community a high priority for the department. And crime dropped for 11 straight years.

In the wake of the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown, however, Domanick has become more
aware of Bratton’s flaws and failures. Bratton’s LAPD, he points out, engaged in racial profiling. About
35 to 40 percent of the pedestrians who were stopped and frisked were African-Americans, at a time in
which blacks constituted only 10 percent of LA’s population; and frisked African-Americans were
actually more than 40 percent less likely than whites to have a weapon.

Nor is it certain that police “saturation policies” caused the steep reductions in crime. Other factors,
Domanick indicates, may well have played a role. The market for crack cocaine collapsed. Possession of
small quantities of marijuana in California became punishable by a $100 fine and not an arrest. Another
“huge factor” may have been the massive influx into the city of Latinos families with cohesive family
units and strong work ethics.

We ask a lot of our police departments. We should judge them, Domanick concludes, “against a backdrop
of a much larger social dysfunction…tied to inequalities of race, class, income, and opportunities.”
Because this backdrop does “one thing well”: it feeds millions of Americans into the world’s largest
prison system, “with no end in sight.”

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